

11/21/93

Jack Valenti

One Day's Passage of Power

From the motorcade, to the hospital, to Air Force One—and to the White House.

I rode serenely in the motorcade in the sixth car following the open convertible carrying President Kennedy and his wife, as well as John Connally, the governor of Texas, and his wife, Nellie. My advertising agency was handling the press during the Texas visit by the president and the vice president, and I came to that Dallas motorcade as the guest of Vice President Johnson.

The day began so full of promise, the motorcade moving slowly by teeming crowds along the streets, nary a hostile sign, only prolonged cheers and warm waves of affection from my fellow Texans. Liz Carpenter smiled happily at me, "They do love this president, don't they?" she murmured.

We turned under the overpass and around the grassy knoll onto Dealey Plaza nearing a building of forgettable architecture called the Texas School Book Depository.

And then began those few minutes of wild disproportion, a ricochet of fear wrapped in terror inside a nightmare. The car in front of us leaped forward, tires screaming against pavement, an Indianapolis racer. The sidewalks swarmed with people. The laughter vanished. The hospitable faces now puzzled, somber.

Liz Carpenter, Pamela Turnure (Mrs. Kennedy's press secretary), Evelyn Lincoln (President Kennedy's secretary) and I looked at each other in bewilderment. What was amiss? Sometimes the brain baffles the entry of a question it does not choose to answer, so hauntingly barren of virtue is the query. So the brain temporizes. Such was my reaction. "Perhaps the president is late for his speech and ordered the motorcade to speed up." I offered this bromide to the others. Our driver pressed the accelerator to the floorboard as we sped toward the Dallas Trade Mart.

Inside the Trade Mart there were some 2,000 people waiting for the president. But the president was not there. A man ran past me with a radio in his hand, a Secret Service agent. "What's wrong?" I screamed at him. "The president has been shot, the governor has been shot. They're at Parkland Hospital." I gathered up my brood, commandeered a Dallas County deputy sheriff's car, conveyed to him the importance of my companions and, with stern keening, we flew to Parkland. Mrs. Lincoln was near collapse as we disembarked at the hospital.



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With the help of others, I managed to get Mrs. Lincoln to the administrator's office. I wandered to the basement of the hospital, where hysteria and despair gathered, Reps. Albert Thomas of Houston, Homer Thornberry of Austin, Jack Brooks of Beaumont, local politicos, police and God knows who else all trying to contain their sanity, to come to grips with a senseless act of mindless malice. To my left was a stainless steel door. Though I did not know it, behind that flat steel facade was the emergency operating room where lay the lifeless body of the president, ministered to by hospital doctors.

I lost track of how much time fled by. Suddenly, a hand was on my shoulder. I turned to

face Cliff Carter, the chief political agent of Vice President Johnson. There was in his eye a kind of bleak ambiguity. His hand trembled. "The vice president wants me to bring you to him, right now, Jack. Let's get moving." He paused and his gaze fell away. "The president is dead, you know," he said tonelessly. Suddenly, I knew the answer to the question I would not ask, I began to weep, uncontrollably. Carter grabbed me sternly: "Get hold of yourself. The vice president wants you."

At a half trot, we approached a small room in the basement where the vice president had been sequestered. A lone Secret Service agent, Lem Johns, stood at the door, "Mr. Valenti, the vice president ordered me to take you to Air Force One. We have to leave now."

A police car dispatched us to Love Field, where the president's plane had been removed to a remote corner of the airfield, guarded by several cordons of menacing officers, heavily armed. With Lem Johns leading, I ran up the steps of Air Force One and walked up to the rear of the plane, to the mid-ship presidential office. It was thickly crowded, a murmur of hushed voices filling the small area.

Then, in the narrow corridor leading to the presidential bedroom, there appeared the huge figure of Lyndon Johnson. Unsmiling, he stood momentarily. Silence drew a curtain over the conversations. LBJ nodded as he faced his friends and sat in a chair on the port side. I remember Rep. Albert Thomas, taller than all but LBJ, speaking. "Mr. President, we are ready to carry any orders you have," he said to his friend of 25 years who for all that time had been "Lyndon" to him.

Strange how this parliamentary leader had begun a transformation before my eyes. He was not the same man I had known, now something larger, harder to fathom. He beckoned to me, and I came to his side. "I want you

on my staff. You'll fly with me back to Washington." Though I was too green to know what "staff" meant, I nodded. My life as I had known it was forever changed.

Months later I read and heard of the hostility on the plane between the Kennedy aides and the new Johnson people. I never saw it or felt it. What I did see and feel was grief so bottomless, grief tearing the entrails from those who a few hours ago bestrode the nation as the president's men. Now they confronted a deformity of the spirit against whose fury no man could retain composure or a grasp on reality. Larry O'Brien and Kenny O'Donnell on that ride back to Washington had no sense of moment. They had lost their moorings.

Johnson made two command decisions: First he would be sworn in aboard Air Force One. He recognized that the nation, the world, was gasping, bewildered, torn by anxiety that had to be soothed. He wanted to display for all the constitutional strappings that bound the nation. A president is dead. A new president is instantly sworn in. The light in the White House may flicker, but the light in the White House never goes out. Second, he would not leave Dallas until the coffin of the 35th president had been brought aboard. Though Bobby Kennedy had counseled otherwise, the new president was firm.

LBJ gave me my first task as a presidential assistant. Get in touch with the Justice Department and retrieve the presidential oath of office. I was on the phone immediately, to a man I never heard of, Nicholas Katzenbach, deputy attorney general. The search for the oath began. It was found in a most unlikely place: the Constitution. Marie Fehmer, LBJ's secretary took down the oath; I read it back to Katzenbach.

Judge Sarah Hughes, summoned to the

plane by LBJ, was ready to supervise the oath sworn by every president since the birth of the Republic. LBJ asked Mrs. Kennedy to stand beside him. She agreed. She came forward from her seat in the rear of the plane, not two feet from the flag-draped coffin of her husband. Her pink blouse was splattered with blood and white flecks of her husband's brain. She stood beside the new president, eyes opaque, unseeing, cast downward, her hands clasped in front of her, her whole figure a resolve cast in grace and dignity.

At 2:40 p.m. Dallas time, Lyndon Johnson became the 36th president of the United States. When it was done, the president kissed Mrs. Kennedy lightly, and she walked uncertainly back to resume her vigil. She never moved from her chair until the plane landed.

LBJ turned to Kennedy's military aide, Gen. Godfrey McHugh: "Let's get airborne," he said. He started working the phones. He called his chief aide, Walter Jenkins, and then McGeorge Bundy, the national security adviser. Meetings with Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and congressional leaders were to be set up in LBJ's vice presidential office in the Executive Office Building (Johnson did not move into the Oval Office until three days later). Secretary of State Dean Rusk and five other Cabinet officers plus Pierre Salinger, JFK's press secretary, were on a plane heading for Japan. Call them back, ordered the new president.

During the flight he sat next to me for a time. He asked a steward for water. When it came, he reached across me to take the glass. I saw close-up the large splayed wrist and fingers. Not a flinch, not a tremble. It was as if he had reined in all his emotions, determined to be composed, decisive, so that a watching world would feel comforted.

We landed at Andrews Air Force Base outside Washington three hours after takeoff. I stood beside Johnson in the crowded narrow corridor connecting the mid-ship office with the rear of the plane. We waited for the Secret Service to give the signal to disembark. And then an odd thing happened suddenly. Bobby Kennedy appeared from the front of the plane, almost trotting, heading for the rear, where the coffin was to be fork-lifted onto a hearse. His gaze was fixed straight ahead. He murmured, "excuse me, excuse me," as he moved swiftly along the narrow lane. He didn't see LBJ, brushing by him quickly. They almost touched. LBJ was impassive. No change in expression. He never mentioned the incident. But I knew, as did he, that Bobby Kennedy's soul was scorched. A grotesque intrusion had collapsed his defenses. He didn't, couldn't, see anything or anybody.

The president disembarked. Before blinding lights, he spoke a 57-word statement. Seven minutes later, the chopper carrying the new president clattered down on the South Lawn of the White House. It was my first visit to the president's house. It was to be LBJ's home for the next five years. Power had passed.

The writer was White House special assistant in the Johnson administration.